

Desert Island Game

Pevans reviews *Vanuatu*

Vanuatu rather snuck up on me – I missed it at Spiel last year, so I was pleased to make its acquaintance when it arrived on the table. The title is, of course, the name of an island nation in the Pacific. Vanuatu is an archipelago of volcanic islands and the game is played on large, hexagonal tiles showing islands and the intervening ocean. The tiles go onto a grid, the central section of the board, with other elements of the game printed around this.

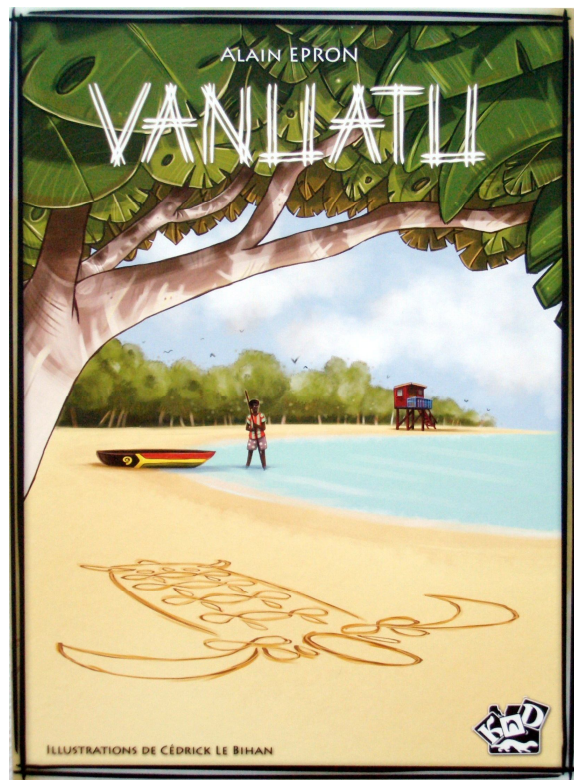
The game starts with one island and two sea tiles on the grid. As the starting island, this has all the features that appear, in varying numbers and mixtures, on the islands. To begin with, there may be wooden cubes in up to three different colours, representing the goods produced in Vanuatu. One of the actions players can take is to buy a cube (for cash) and place it on a ship (for export) to gain victory points. There are, of course, some restrictions around this. First, as with many of the actions, players must have their ship adjacent to the island they buy the cube from.

To get victory points for a cube, there has to be a space for it on one of the ships in the 'Chamber of Foreign Trade' section of the board. The different goods cost different amounts and, the more expensive the good, the more points it's worth. There's also a bonus for the player who adds the last cube to a ship. This leads to a bit of cat and mouse as players try not to put a second-to-last cube on a ship. At the end of the round, full ship cards are removed from the board and new ones drawn.

Next, spaces on the island show where players can build a 'stall', placing one of their house-shaped wooden pieces. This costs money and the player must have their ship adjacent to the island. Stalls are needed for some other actions and will usually score points at the end of the game.

Each island has an icon that indicates the maximum number of tourists it can hold. Tourist pawns appear (at the 'Tourism Office' on the board) at the start of each round, according to a randomly drawn tile. Another action for players is to move a tourist to an island (that their ship is adjacent to, of course). This gives them some cash, according to the number of stalls on the island. The number of tourist pawns on an island is also the points scored by players for each of their stalls on that island at the end of the game.

Finally, islands may have little turtle icons. Players can score a few victory points by taking the action to 'draw' a turtle on the beach (it's a tourist attraction, apparently). They place a black disc over the icon and score the points. A track around the board is





Starting a game: Red's already built a stall

use to track victory points scored as the game goes on. A lot of points can be scored at the end of the game, so this isn't necessarily an indicator of who's winning.

There are only two icons that can appear on sea tiles: fish and treasure. When the tile is placed, small wooden discs are added according to the numbers on any icons (in rather small print). Two more actions available to players are then to fish or to dive for treasure – if their ship is on a tile with a disc of the right sort. They take a cardboard chit showing the value of their fish or treasure (equal to the number of those discs on the tile – that is, if there are three fish discs, the first tile is worth 3; there are then 2 discs, so the next fishing action will get a 2 chit and so on).

Fish can be sold (another action) if the player's ship is next to an island where they have a stall. The selling price for fish is shown by a track on the board. It starts at the top each round and drops by one each time a player sells fish. Selling fish is thus the best way of getting money and can be very valuable. Treasure can be used as money, too: one cash for each point on the chit. However, if held until the end, it is worth double its value in victory points – leftover cash only scores one point for every three vatus (the Vanuatan currency).

You'll have noticed from the preceding that the position of your ship is important. Thus another action is to move your ship. You can move up to three (sea) tiles at a cost of 1 vatu each. As the game goes on, more tiles are laid, the playing area expands and you will need two rounds to move across the board. This makes positioning important as it can take at least two actions, in separate rounds, to cross the board if you're stuck on the wrong side.

Players' final action is to 'rest': kick back and enjoy a cocktail! Players who rest get a chip of their choice from the set of four available. Well, the first player to rest gets a choice of four, the next chooses from three and so on. The usual choice is to take the chip that makes you first player next round (on the last turn it's worth 3 points). Second choice is usually the one that provides one cash and one point. The other two are worth a point and one cash, respectively. The chips take effect at the end of the round.

That's a total of nine different actions available. Some of these provide victory points, others provide the cash needed to carry out the other actions and some are about getting into position to do things. However, players do not have a free choice of which actions they take. At the start of each round there is a clever sort-of-auction between the players for the actions they want. Even then, they may not get to use all the actions they've bid for.

Across the top of the board is a row of nine spaces, one for each action. Players have five bidding markers (stubby wooden cylinders). In turn order, each player places two markers (on one or two spaces). Then they place another two each and, finally, their last marker. Once that's done, players start taking actions, in turn order. However, you can only take an action where you have the top bid. Ties are broken in turn order. That is, if two players have the same number of markers in a box, the player who's ahead in turn order has the better bid and may take the action.

When you take an action, you remove your markers and carry out whatever the action lets you do, paying any costs and receiving any rewards. If you can't meet the requirements of the action, you don't get to do it. Similarly, if you are not top in any action, you have to remove your marker(s) from a box and do nothing. Once you've removed your marker(s), the player who now has the highest bid for that action can take it in their turn.



The full view of the board

This is a clever little game on its own. You may have five action markers, but you can't expect to get five actions in a round. Hence, it is worth putting multiple markers into boxes – especially if this gets you the action ahead of others. The other thing this underlines is the importance of turn order. Being first is the tie-breaker when taking actions, but it also means you have to commit yourself first in the bidding. Being last means you get to place the last bid. To be sure of out-bidding you, another player has to place all their markers in one box, which means you don't need to. However, you lose all the ties when taking actions and you can get shut out.

This ingenious mechanism is clearly the heart of the game. You must be in a position to get the actions you need. This may mean getting the Rest action first to be able to be first in turn order next turn. It's not just the bidding at the start of the round, either. If you need to move your ship before you can take your 'Fish' action, you can be stymied by other players who've outbid you to move. They can delay their moves, forcing you to take the Fish action first and waste it. This is really clever stuff.

And it's not over yet. There is one other major element of the game: the character cards. Each of these gives the holder some bonus or special advantage. At the start of each round, players choose a character for that round. Only when they've chosen do they return the character they had in the previous round. Obviously, this stops players having the same character two turns in a row. However, it also means that you want to be next in turn order after the player who's currently holding the character you're after!

The characters can be very useful, particularly if you can get one that helps with what you're planning to do this round. For example, if you're looking to sail your ship this round, the Navigator lets you do so for free. The only issue with the characters is that they can be very powerful and potentially unbalance the game. The obvious danger is the Buyer. This gives a second cube (of the same colour) when taking a good from an island. Do this with the most valuable colour and it's worth a decent number of points – even more if you fill a ship and get this bonus as well.

Personally, I think that the characters add a lot to the game and I would always include them. However, for those of the opposite opinion, *Vanuatu* can be played without using the character cards. Tellingly, this is the way it's being played in the EuropeMasters tournament this October (at Spiel). EuropeMasters take their games seriously!

What I haven't mentioned yet is how additional tiles get onto the board. This is another advantage of being first player in the round: you



Vanuatu on display at EuropeMasters

place the tiles. There are always two tiles to play: one may be an island, the other – or

both – will be sea. Clearly, you want to place the tiles where they'll do you most good – particularly if the other players' ships are over the other side of the board! However, the rules on placing tiles restrict just where you can put them.

There is one last wrinkle to the game. Players' money is recorded on a track with a marker. If that marker reaches or passes 10, the player loses 10 cash and gains 5 victory points. Excellent, you may think: that's a better exchange rate than at the end of the game. However, the problem is when you have exactly 10 cash. Suddenly you have no money, which really restricts the actions you can take. The rule feels a bit artificial, which I don't usually like, but in this case it gives players another thing to think about – and is entertaining.

The game ends after 8 turns (the island/sea tiles keep track of this). Players sell any fish they still hold, convert their remaining cash to victory points and score for any treasure they hold, their stalls and the first player chip. The player with the most points wins, of course.

The bottom line is that *Vanuatu* is a game where turn order is crucial. It's not just about getting to be first player, it's about where you are in the turn order. The bidding mechanism at the start of each round is brilliant and gives players some crucial decisions to make every turn.

My initial impression was that *Vanuatu* was relatively lightweight, but I quickly changed my mind the first time I played. There is a lot to think about and the game offers plenty of tactical and strategic opportunities. This means there's plenty of re-play value as well. I have hugely enjoyed my first few games and look forward to playing it a lot more.

Vanuatu was designed by Alain Epron and published (in France) by Krok Nik Douil. It is a strategy board game for 3-5 players, aged 12+ and takes 1½-2 hours to play. It gets 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. This review was first published in the *Gamers Alliance Report* (www.gamersalliance.com) Fall 2012 and then in *To Win Just Once* 130 (December 2012) – www.pevans.co.uk/TWJO.

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